

Thunder and lightning without rain: The case of popular African preachers

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Abstract

Today in the African context in general and Malawi in particular there has been a proliferation of preachers, prophets, bishops and local pastors whose preaching leaves a lot to be desired. The majority of the popular sermons demonstrate a lack in proper biblical understanding. Yet the preachers feel called to preach and teach the word of God. This article therefore aims at evaluating and analysing sermons of the preachers in the church. But due to an apparent lack of formal Bible literacy lessons the sermons lack biblical understanding and therefore this status affects the spiritual growth of the majority of the congregants. It is like we have a lot of thunder and lightning, but if you do not have the rain nothing grows on the ground. Preaching must break through the bad cultural practices, like Jesus who unsettled the Jewish culture and turned it upside-down in His teaching. We should be willing to be preaching fools. Therefore, in this article we are suggesting a homiletical theory and praxis which regards the biblical text and the people's context – Word and world – as serious.

Keywords

African preachers; prophets; bishops; preaching; sermon analysis; cultural practices

1. Introduction

Today in the African context in general and Malawian in particular, there is a proliferation of preachers, prophets, bishops and local pastors. Listening to most of these preachers, one cannot fail to notice and admire their zeal and expressiveness in preaching. They definitely have an inherent ability to animate and use modes of communication that are common in

the community and relevant to the society. Their smoothness in delivery is indeed unique and unsurpassed.

But if the ultimate goal of a preaching is to interpret the Biblical texts for the contemporary world (Campbell & Cilliers 2012:70–71), then most of the sermons fall short of that standard. Yes, they become fools by their animated gesticulation on the account that all their efforts produce too little fruit, if any. But this is not the kind of preaching fools Paul envisioned in 1 Corinthians. They interrupt and unsettle their hearers through their charisma, but their theatrics do not allow the Spirit of God to form and reform their audience (Ibid 43–45), producing a people that are always in the state of liminality in as far as spiritual formation is concerned. Their performance is indeed akin to thunder and lightning that is not accompanied by rain.

In describing what true preaching is, Haddon W. Robinson (2001) not only acknowledges the place and importance of fervent preaching, he also underscores the most critical constituent of true and authentic Gospel. He states that, “Preachers should pour out the message with passion and fervour in order to stir souls. Not all passionate pleading from a pulpit, however, possesses divine authority. When preachers speak as heralds, they must cry out ‘the Word.’ Anything less cannot legitimately pass for Christian preaching” (p. 20). Robinson’s words resonate with what God declares in Isaiah 55:10–11 that His Word alone has the power to bring about transformation and productivity in people’s lives. In the oracle, God declares that just as rain comes down from heaven and causes the earth to bud and flourish so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so does His word that comes out of His mouth. It does not return to Him empty but accomplishes what God desires and achieves the purpose for which He sends it. It is neither the lightning nor the thunder that the earth needs, but the rain. It is the message not the superfluities that truly matter.

Examining the sermons of the popular preachers, it becomes clear that behind the façade of eloquence and piety that they exude, there is a serious deficiency – a worrisome superficiality, in their basic understanding of the Bible and hermeneutical abilities. It seems as the theatrics and oratory skills – the thunder and lightning – they display in their pulpits is an effort to appear as delivering the real message. Their tendency can suggest at least

two things: a shallowness of Bible understanding and exegetical skills and a desire to impress or manipulate through persuasive and speechmaking skills. We will begin with the latter.

2. A desire to impress

By its very nature, the true and authentic Gospel does not make the preacher very popular, at least, in the eyes of the world. As a matter of fact, the Gospel reduces its bearer to the status of a fool.

The Apostle Paul affirms in 1 Corinthians 4:9–11: “We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonoured! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.’

Yet a good section of the popular preachers of our modern day appear keenly determined to avoid any appearance of foolishness or weakness in their ministries. For them ministry is all about glory and glamour. Some seem to be in competition with each other to see who drives a better car, or lives in a better mansion, or has a bigger church, or makes more money. In order to ascend that lofty perch, they have to be determined to do whatever it takes to help their cause. They cannot afford to look vulnerable. They just have to look stylish and sophisticated. They have to refine their oratory skills and carry themselves with a swagger befitting the noble and the important. Unfortunately, true preaching however is diametrically contrary to this. The preaching of the true Gospel is for those willing to become fools for the sake of Christ. Campbell and Cilliers (2012) observe,

Preaching fools are unafraid of being vulnerable. They are more like the self-emptying Christ than the exalted orator. They are more like the clown than the trapeze artist or the lion tamer. They are more like the jester than the ruler. They speak a serious Word, but do not take themselves too seriously. In their humanity they, like Paul, interrupt all forms of preaching that trust in disembodied, eloquent words of wisdom (Campbell & Cilliers 2012:161).

Furthermore, the present-day preachers cannot afford to be offensive if they have to command a huge following. Their sermons avoid all scandalous parts of the Gospel. Consequently, their preaching loses its essence and power in the attempt to make the Gospel more palatable. In the end they are left with an impotent and adulterated Gospel to peddle. A Gospel that cannot melt the solidity of the world, or instigate and sustain liminality, or foster new perspectives (Campbell & Cilliers 2012: 67–102). Thus, their preaching becomes thunderbolts and lightning without rain!

3. A lack in simple Bible literacy and exegetical skills

It appears that although a good percentage of some contemporary preachers choose to build personal empires as seen above, there is also another group that flashes and thunders without rain simply because of a lack of proper and simple Biblical literacy training. They have a desire to correctly handle the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15), quite alright, but they have not had the opportunity or means to acquire the pre-requisite training or any introduction to Biblical literacy. Perhaps the majority of the preachers in Malawi belong to this category. In regard to preaching, the ultimate goal of preaching should be to build the Church of God, the faith community and not focused on the preacher.

Mugambi & Magesa (eds; 1990: 39) explain what the gospel requires from a church: "... a church without privileges, a church liberated...from bondage to psychologism, individualism and bourgeois ideals. By confessing Christ, existing as a community, and one that should become not the church of crowns (as symbols of powers) but the church of the cross (which is the symbol of suffering) a church where discipleship means obedience to Christ alone and living for others without seeking recognition or approval from anyone except Christ himself."

For status quo-disrupting preaching to take place, the preacher may need to understand both the Scriptures and the people to whom he is ministering. Robinson (2001) observes that "...expositors serve as builders of bridges as they endeavour to span the gulf between the Word of God and the concerns of men and women. To do this they must be as familiar with the needs of their churches as they are with the content of their Bibles" (54). The getting familiar with the contents of the Bible, and how to rightly apply

and deliver its message to the right audience is the crux of the matter and the particular focus of this paper.

Consequently, while one endeavours to consider interpretation, the type of literature or its genre must be considered as well. The genre is not there for decorative purposes but to bring about the impact that is desired as the message is communicated. Long (1985:12) warns that: “The mistake in this, of course, is that the literary dimensions of the texts are not merely decorative. Texts are not packages containing ideas; they are means of communication. When we ask ourselves what a text means, we are not searching for the idea of the text. We are trying to discover its total impact upon a reader and everything about a text works together to create that impact.’

4. Framework for the proper understanding of a Biblical message

One way is to think of performing scripture, this means re-enacting what scripture teaches from the author’s perspective. This involves reading and re-reading of the Bible, taking note of what is happening in the passages. Asking what is God doing in the passage? what is it that the passaging is teaching? How can one respond to such scriptures? Fowl and Jones (1991:61) state: ‘Ultimately, we read and perform Scripture in the hope that our own lives will be transformed into the likeness of Christ. Such transformation takes place in and through the formation of communities of disciples. That is, the likeness of Christ is manifest not simply in isolated individuals, but in the life of believing communities. Such communities of committed disciples are both presupposition and the goal of interpreting Scripture. We learn to become wise readers of Scripture and perform it in and through the practices of Christian community.’

The other way to help and equip preachers for the sacred calling of preaching, is through Wolvaardt (2013) outlines and explains the three basic processes that a preacher must follow in order to correctly preach from a passage of Scripture. These processes are exegesis, hermeneutics, and homiletics

(2013:23–31).¹ He explains that during the exegesis process, the preacher must transfer himself into the situation of the original receivers of a particular passage and dig into the text in order to understand its message as it was understood by the original receivers.

He must endeavour to understand the context in which the message was given and received and ascertain what the author intended to communicate. This entails discovering who the writer was and to whom he was writing. It also requires understanding the type of literature the writer employed and determining the right method of analysis in order to arrive at the meaning of that particular text. Having understood the message from the text, this could be done using the simple principle that scripture interprets scripture. Reading and re-reading of Biblical texts helps to comprehend the message in its original context.²

The preacher must now establish which parts of that message are only applicable to the original receivers and which ones are applicable to the present-day audience and everyone else. Wolvaardt points out that some parts of the message might only be applicable to the original receivers because the author intended to address a particular and unique situation that they were in; while other parts might be applicable to all believers of all generations, regardless of their circumstances and time in history. The process of differentiating the imperative and relative message in the Bible is always a big challenge for many preachers. When the preacher has determined the message of the text, he must now check how his message compares or agrees with the message of the whole Bible. This process is called hermeneutics. Once hermeneutics is done, the preacher is now ready for homiletics. This is the process whereby the preacher prepares how to communicate the message he has found and applied from the text to his contemporary audience through a sermon or teaching, or whatever form he reckons appropriate (2013: 23–31).

1 This is bible interpretation, a do-it-yourself manual which outlines how one could do a thorough analysis of the passage without necessarily consulting many other resources. People of different levels of education can use this method because it is skill-based.

2 Wolvaardt has given a list of 6 basic steps to do a semantic discourse analysis of a passage in order to understand the meaning from the author's perspective.

This process is easy and is a do it yourself method that does not need many years of theological training, but a discipline to understand the Bible. These three processes when properly followed ensure that what the preacher delivers in his sermon is the true and authentic Gospel – the rain that transmutes the earth. Anything less is a misnomer; thunder and lightning without water! It must be pointed out, however, that there is more involved in Wolvaardt's three processes of Biblical interpretation, which every preacher may want to be acquainted with and hone his or her skills on in order to become a workman/woman who correctly share the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). This calls for some kind of simple skill-based bible and exegetical training on the part of all preachers.

For the purposes of illustrating our argument, three sample sermons randomly selected from some of the popular preachers in Malawi will be looked at and analysed in brief.

Sermon 1

One preacher delivered a sermon about Zacchaeus taken from Luke 19:1–10. The Sermon title was *Jesus is the Tree of Life*. The man of God basically allegorized the whole story as follows:

1. Zacchaeus' shortness represented sin. The tax collector was in fact a man of standard height. He is said to be short in order to emphasize the fact that he did not meet God's standard of righteousness. God sees every sinner as a short man!
2. The Sycamore tree he climbed was not a real tree. It was a symbol representing Jesus Christ. God's remedy for sin is Jesus Christ.
3. Jesus walking through Jericho represents God moving among the people of the world. He can only be seen by those who are tall, i.e. those who are justified through and in Christ.
4. He finished the preaching by inviting people to come to Jesus, the tree of life, and have their sins forgiven.

Analysis of sermon 1

Although the preacher correctly pointed out that Jesus is the only solution for the problem of sin, he did not handle the text responsibly. Using Wolvaardt's framework of biblical interpretation, several things can be

pointed. If the preacher had some training in biblical interpretation, he probably would have been able to see that the story was in fact dramatic history. These were real events that happened at a particular time in history. Jesus actually encountered short Zacchaeus, who happened to be a tax – collector as he entered the real place called Jericho. As such, the story had to be interpreted as a historical narrative using proper methods relevant to this type of literature. Failure to recognize that this text was not an allegory spelled trouble at the very onset.

The preacher also did not undertake to research and understand the communication situation. As such, he did not realize the significance of Zacchaeus being a tax collector for the Roman government among his own people the Jews. This kind of information could have helped the preacher appreciate how much of an outcast Zacchaeus was among his own kinsmen and the religious leaders. None of Zacchaeus’ contemporaries expected Jesus to actively seek out this kind of man. Yet Jesus did. Furthermore, Jesus went on to the outcast’s house to dine and have fellowship with him and his family.

The ending of the story points clearly to the gist of the whole narrative: “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost” (Luke 10:9–10, NIV). Although it may be almost obvious, for a seasoned scholar of the Bible, to see that the author intended for his audience to understand that the main point of the story was that Jesus’ mission to the earth was to pursue and redeem those that were lost, our preacher had no skills to help him see it. This kind of wrong presentation of biblical facts is found not only in Malawi but also several countries in sub-Sahara Africa.

Sermon 2

The second homily, delivered by a visiting evangelist, was taken from Genesis 27:1–40. This is the story of Esau and Jacob. The sermon title was *Shave off your hair!* The preacher posited that Esau’s sin subsisted in his skin being hairy. His hairy body was indicative of a sinful heart. The preacher thus implored the congregation to shave off the hairs of their hearts in order to be saved and experience the blessings of God. By the end of the service, the church felt entertained and they were begging the itinerant preacher to visit again with more sermons.

Analysis of sermon 2

Like the first one, this preacher too showed some serious signs of shallowness in Biblical understanding and hermeneutical competence. It is clear that the preacher did not care to consider any rules of proper Biblical exegesis or some whatsoever. He totally ignored the communication situation, both the immediate and broader context of the narrative, the significance of the particular events recorded in the text, and never bothered to compare his findings with the rest the Bible. In spite of his eloquence, humour and public allure, the preacher failed to deliver the solid Word of God from the passage, which is the real essence of Biblical preaching.

Sermon 3

Another preacher delivered a sermon titled *A Christian living in holiness must not suffer*. His text was 1 John 3:8b, which reads “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (NIV). His central idea was: Because Jesus Christ destroyed every work of the devil, no true believer is supposed to suffer.

His main points were:

5. Every form of suffering, i.e. sickness, poverty, unemployment, childlessness, etc, is a work of the devil
6. Jesus completely defeated the devil on the cross
7. Born again Christians are totally free from the devil’s power. They are entitled to a good life right here on earth. He went on to say that the abundant life of John 10:10 implied that Christians are entitled to a life of plenty. And finally,
8. Suffering is a sign of sin in a believer’s life. If a believer is experiencing difficulties in life, that is a sure sign that he or she has sinned against God, or that he or she has little faith.
9. By the end of the sermon, the whole congregation was enthused and, on its feet, either claiming their complete victory in Christ or crying for forgiveness since they felt God was displeased with them hence their difficulties and suffering in life.

Analysis of sermon 3

Again, looking at the text contextually, one observes that Apostle John is talking about how the children of God versus the children of the devil live with respect to sin. God's children are no longer dominated by sin, (i) because Christ appeared to take away their sin (v 5–6), (ii) because Christ appeared to destroy the works of the devil (v 8), and (iii) because God's seed remains in them (9). The children on the devil, on the other hand, continue to live in sin because the devil himself is sinful (v 8a). We can therefore understand from the passage that when the author writes that "Christ came to destroy the devil's work", he is referring to sin. There is nothing whatsoever about sickness, poverty, unemployment, etc.

When tested against the broader biblical and theological framework, the points and arguments that true believers must not suffer, and that suffering is a "sure" sign of sin in the life of a believer do not hold. Scripture is replete with instances where saintly believers suffered enormously simply by virtue of being true followers of Jesus Christ. The notion that believers must be always be wealthy and healthy is one of the hallmarks for an adulterated Gospel. Apostle Peter once said, "...do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."

5. Suggested homiletical theory and praxis

As observed earlier on, most of these popular preachers possess natural oratory skills that resonate very well with their audiences. From using powerful and gripping illustrations to voice control and bodily expressions, the preacher is a natural master. However, significant problems are noted when it comes to biblical interpretation and application. The three sermons captured above bear the testimony. Principles of proper biblical interpretation and hermeneutics need to be imparted to these men and women of God in order to help them bring real rain over and above all the thunder and lightning they already possess in abundance. This is why we propose the following.

6. The homiletical theory and praxis that may work in our context

Our proposal is to go back to the Bible and use both text and context ethos appeal and the word of God in the process of preaching. In this regard Resner (1999: 171) gives a very important insight that both theology and rhetoric, audience and texts, should go together. He explains:

In the use of ethos appeal the preacher extends his or her function as a witness to the gospel by naming the gospel's interpreted occurrences within the temporal time frame of the preacher's own experience. Apologetic ethos appeals are the preacher's personal testimony to God's redemptive activity in the world as the preacher has been privileged to see it or experience it. In this sense, then, apologetic ethos can usefully be labelled temporal instantiation. An instantiation is a making of concrete of what is abstract. In order for preaching to transcend the level of abstract talk about theological doctrines, or abstract talk of events from long ago, the preacher concretizes for the hearers, usually in narrative form the way in which the gospel is both real and present (1997:171).

The preacher might indeed be encouraged to use his oratory skills, his ability to animate and hold the attention of his hearers, but there must be a deliberate action to bring the balance with the Word. Most of the preachers have had no opportunity for simple training. It is important to introduce some simple training so that the preaching of the word could bear some fruit.

Wilson also makes this point clearer when he recognises that not only the word or rhetoric, but the process must include all the ingredients that are needed for preaching.

Wilson (1995:62) states that: "Revelation needs both to be given by God and received. This we say about Reception also concerns the preacher's experience, language, theology, and rhetorical skills, in fact the entire life, in service. In other words, as preachers we come to see our theology and our rhetoric as inseparable. We have not done good theology until it has been communicated to our people. Preaching is the most direct way in which church members experience God."

It is very encouraging noting the statement that preachers must see their theology and their rhetoric as inseparable. In the missionary era in Africa, many teachers tried to discourage Africans from using their indigenous knowledge system to develop their own style of preaching. They were told to use three pointer sermons, using statistics, quotations and theories. This is not how the most Africans think, they are an oral community and they love story telling, testimonies, myths, parables and proverbs – that is how they store and pass on knowledge.

Bosch (1991:465) notes that “ The Gospel must remain good news while becoming up to a certain point a cultural phenomenon, while it takes into account the meaning systems already present in the context on the one hand, it offers the cultures “the knowledge of the divine mystery,” while on the other it helps them “to bring forth from their own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought, this approach breaks radically with the idea of the faith as “kernel” and the culture as “husk” – which in any case is, to a large extent, an illustration of the Western scientific tradition’s distinction between “content” and “form.”

The dilemma in our context is that you have great theologians whose teaching is well informed by history, tradition and the Bible, but when it comes to communication, they cannot communicate, they seem aloof and fail to make any impact to his audience. Yet you have a populist preacher who is able to animate and communicate, using the inherent ability to do this and yet there is a deficiency in understating the Bible and therefore the impact of his sermon is over when the preaching is over. We should find a way of addressing this dilemma. The solution must consider the context very seriously as Bosch has suggested.

In order to solve this problem, we might redefine the process of preaching within a specific context. Since everyone has a chance to preach in our context, the popular preachers are always eager to preach, the lay leaders are also eager to preach, it is not possible to stop them. There should be a paradigm shift in the way we do our ministry. Those trained ministers must become the trainers of those who are not trained. Every preacher needs a mentor. There should be deliberate move to train those who are lacking the knowledge. Bosch explains this even better, he states that those trained may view those who are not trained, in other words those popular

preachers as co-workers. This is going back to the scriptures in talking about the priesthood of all believers.

Bosch (1991:485) maintains: “The ministry of the clergy should be that of a guardian to help keep the community faithful to the teaching practices of apostolic Christianity. The clergy cannot do this alone and off their butt, so to speak, but together with the whole people of God, for all have received the Holy Spirit who guides the church in all truth. The priesthood of the ordained ministry is to enable, not to remove, the priesthood of the whole Church. The clergy are not prior to, or independent of, or over against the Church, rather with the rest of God’s people, they are the Church sent into the world, in order to flesh out this vision, that we need a more organic, less sacral ecclesiology of the whole people of God.”

7. Proposed way forward

There should be a great change on how we do church, the focus might be training of leaders, providing a process of understanding the Bible, applying the Bible to your everyday life and finally communicating the Bible to the faith communities. Change is always risky but the leaders of every Church in countries they serve may want to look at this situation and dilemma as a serious problem.

The preachers may be training to understand they are meant to be servants of God. They might not seek to impress, but to please God. They should be willing to be vulnerable, they must be willing to become fools for Christ. The Paul states in 1 Corinthians 1:22-25: “Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”

Vulnerability means a willingness to be preaching fools, and to be Christ centred, whether one becomes popular or not, the focus should be on the Cross of Jesus Christ. Hendriks in his book *Studying congregations in Africa*, offers some help in suggesting “correlation hermeneutics”.

How does one describe the Word of the Holy Spirit, of faith seeking understanding? The perspective of the method may thus be called “correlation hermeneutics”. It is a two-dimensional exegesis of the world and the word that takes place in a gathered faith community who actively rely on God’s presence and guidance. This process of applying Scripture could help the lay people (Hendriks 2004:30). Correlation hermeneutics is participatory where all those who are involved in the ministry of preaching the Word of God may come together with those faith communities to pray and discuss the word of God. Studying the Word of God on a continuous basis, helps to change our perspective on how ministry of the Word is done. It also helps to focus on how our minds perceive God.

Cilliers (2012:12) explains: “Preaching as reframing perceives and renames; it disrupts and disturbs. However, it also points towards new realities and new possibilities. It constantly changes our fixed images of God; it reminds us that our experiences of God, our theologies and preaching on God, are but the beginning, and that our deepest dogmas and finest formulations are but stuttering on the profoundest mystery that is God. It aids us in looking in and through the framing mirror – the looking glass – of the biblical text, knowing full well that God’s revelation is simultaneously God’s concealment, and God’s concealment is simultaneously God’s revelation. It reminds us that our frames are not structures of steel, but pen lines and brushstrokes.”

This is an approach that understands the frailty of our humanness, the preliminary character of our faith seeking understanding (*fides querens intellectum*), because God is mystery. We therefore depend on God; we depend on the Holy Spirit for a revelation of the mysteries of God. We also contend that the purpose of preaching must concentrate and focus on building and nurturing the church – beyond mere numerical growth. Understanding our role as human beings, and the importance of relying on God for help, is the key to success.

8. Conclusion

When there is a lot of thunder and lightning but no rainfall the ground remains dry and nothing grows. The preaching in this context is always lively, in most cases loud with loud music but the content of the Word is very

minimal or miss presented as we have seen. For the Church to grow there is need for true preaching. The television and the radio have become another platform where sermons are broadcast. The metaphor of thunder and the lightening are the style of the popular preachers, and the lay leaders. They have an inherit ability to speak, they are blessed with oratory skills and yet in the sermons the word of God is minimal. The content is the rain, when the content of God's word has been properly presented well, not matter the delivery method, the impact will be seen. Both the text and context must be considered, exegesis of the word and World must be taken seriously. It is very dangerous to preach the Christ without the Cross, Salvation without sacrifice, perfection without perseverance.

In the end we must embrace the fact that we are all preaching fools, we depend on God and His revelation in order to make the desired impact on the Church of God. We must study scripture in order to deliver not just rhetoric but God's word for the spiritual growth of the faith community.

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